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# The many lives of Joseph Dibee

By [Conrad Wilson](#) (OPB)

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## What a 20-year-old arson says about domestic terrorism today

In the 1990s, some knew Joseph Mahmoud Dibee as “Seattle.” It was his codename, according to his FBI wanted poster.

Today, the former international fugitive is stuck in Seattle, confined by a house-arrest order and awaiting trial on federal charges, including allegations he participated in an arson at a Central Oregon slaughterhouse in 1997.

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At times, the federal government has portrayed fringe actors in the environmental



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Speaking during a hearing before a Congressional subcommittee in February 2002 — five months after the al-Qaeda hijackers toppled the Twin Towers — then-FBI domestic terrorism section chief James Jarboe warned lawmakers of the “dramatic changes in the nature of the terrorist threat” to America, though he wasn’t referring to the country’s then-rapidly expanding global war on terror.

“During the past several years, special interest extremism, as characterized by the Animal Liberation Front and the Earth Liberation Front, has emerged as a serious terrorist threat,” Jarboe said.

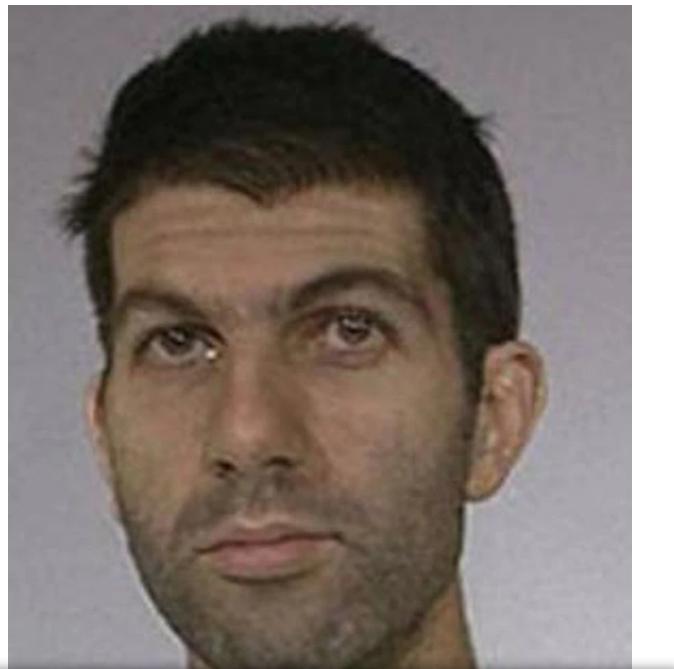
The federal government says between 1995 and 2001, the Earth Liberation Front and Animal Liberation Front were responsible for property destruction in five western states, totaling more than \$45 million.

The spree of property damage included a toppled 80-foot transmission tower in Oregon and the [arson of a ski lodge in Colorado](#). After a May 21, 2001, arson of several buildings at an Oregon tree farm, investigators said one of the buildings that remained standing carried a message. Spray-painted alongside the letters ELF was a simple phrase: “YOU CANNOT CONTROL WHAT IS WILD!”

The U.S. Department of Justice indicted 18 people, describing several as members of a radical sect known as “The Family.” Prosecutors then and now say Dibee actively participated in some of the attacks.

“The reality is I’m an environmentalist, and somebody decided to say that I’m part of some organization that doesn’t exist,” Dibee told OPB in his first interview since being arrested in 2018. “It’s more, as I understand it, the philosophy that binds people. And that’s quite different than what the government is claiming.”

At 6-foot-3, Dibee is thin, though at 53, his cheeks are fuller than the handsome man in his 30s posted in FBI wanted bulletins. His graying hair, defined chin, and warm eyes invite conversation. He’s a



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The Department of Justice, meanwhile, calls him a radical and a terrorist who spent years evading capture. After federal agents began asking questions about his alleged role in the arsons, Dibee fled the country. When he was captured in August 2018, the U.S. Department of Justice issued a press release: “Oregon Domestic Terrorism Suspect in Custody After 12 Years on the Run.”

Dibee disputes that depiction. Since fleeing the United States, he’s spent time raising a stepson with his wife in Russia and trying to build environment-saving technologies in Syria and South America.

“Certainly people change over time. I mean, we all grow, we all learn. We all develop emotionally and intellectually,” Dibee told OPB. “The things that haven’t changed are my commitment to the environment and helping people realize a cleaner, safer environment. I don’t think that’s changed.”

A trial date now looms for Dibee, 23 years after the events at the heart of the case. And the debate over domestic extremism — what it is and how to respond — is fundamentally different.

Since the Jan. 6 attack on the U.S. Capitol, members of Congress and law enforcement have held hearings to discuss domestic threats and how to respond. Some in law enforcement believe that to stamp out domestic extremism, the United States needs more aggressive prosecutions. They argue the absence of a domestic terrorism statute has allowed political violence to grow unchecked. But Dibee, who has lived in the Middle East and experienced the raw violence of extremist groups, says property destruction alone can hardly be counted as terroristic acts.



Joseph Mahmoud Dibee

*via Federal Bureau of Investigations*

## An American life

Dibee is the son of Syrian refugees, and maintains dual citizenship. He describes a tumultuous life early on, as his family fled conflicts and tried to establish a life in Washington state.



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movement hadn't really come into play, and he was considered nonwhite," Dibee said.

His dad dealt with racial slurs and denied educational opportunities because he was from the Middle East.

Though the family tried to establish roots in the United States, Dibee said, racism and other obstacles caused them to return to Syria in the 1970s. Dibee's relatives lived in a small village outside Tartus, not far from the border with Lebanon, where they farmed olives.

Conflicts would inevitably drive the family back out of Syria. After a cycle of returning to and leaving the United States, Dibee said, his parents left Syria permanently in 1976 when the country intervened in the Lebanese civil war.

"I remember flying out of Syria and almost getting shot down," Dibee said. "They had all the women and the children moved to the windows because the airplane was intercepted by fighter jets — to make sure that the fighter jets saw that the people on board were women and children and civilians."

He was 8.

Dibee spoke only Arabic for the first part of his life, and that language barrier landed him in special education classes in Seattle-area schools.

Dibee was teased and had difficulty making friends. It was also around this time that he discovered he had a talent for math.

"The good thing about math is there's only 10 letters," Dibee said. "I blew through math."

By the fourth grade, his father, former Seattle University economics professor Khalil Dibee, was teaching him algebra. By the time he was a student at Garfield High School, he was taking college math courses at Seattle University. Dibee eventually went to college there and earned degrees in environmental engineering and biology.

His love for nature came mostly from his father, an expert gardener and mountaineer, who was an REI member back in its early co-op days. Dibee recalled being in nature frequently as a child, as his parents took him on yearly trips to pick chanterelle



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“They would literally get a year’s worth and put them in a freezer,” he said. As his parents picked mushrooms, he would explore. He remembers finding a hidden clearing in the woods.

“This little creek ran through the meadow,” Dibee said. “There were deer and there were grouse, and if I was really quiet, I could walk up to the stream and see trout.”

He returned to that meadow year after year.

“This place was unbelievably beautiful,” he said.

But one year, he discovered it had been destroyed during a logging operation. A feeling of tremendous loss welled inside of him.

As he grew older, the feeling would return as he took mountaineering trips and could see clear-cuts in every direction.

“I thought, well, somebody has got to do something about it,” Dibee said. “And that somebody was me.”

## Cavel West

The plot to burn down Cavel West can be traced to an article that ran in the Eugene Register-Guard.

A January 1997 [investigation by the Associated Press](#) had revealed questionable practices of government employees adopting wild horses at low costs through a federal program, and then selling them for a profit to slaughterhouses shortly after.

The story featured Cavel West, a Belgian-owned facility in Redmond that killed thousands of horses over the years, packing the meat for export to Europe.

An environmentalist and animal rights activist named Kevin Tubbs took note of the article. Months after the Associated Press published, he took it to other activists he knew, and they devised a plan.

In 2007, Tubbs pleaded guilty to dozens of charges, including conspiracy to commit



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Dibee's alleged job was to prepare timing devices that would ignite the fire at Cavel West, prosecutors learned from other defendants.

"Mr. Dibee believed that it could be burned by drilling large holes in the walls and pouring fuel into the walls," prosecutors said at Tubbs' sentencing hearing.

Others convicted in the plot admitted to mixing glycerine soap with fuel and blending it into a gel, which one newspaper report described as "vegan jello."

One of the defendants who admitted to mixing the accelerant was Jonathan Paul. He pleaded guilty to the arson in 2007. He [told a documentary crew](#) after he was released from prison that Cavel West was chosen as a target because it was a "horrible, evil place."

"The plan was we had to destroy the infrastructure," Paul said.

On July 21, 1997, according to prosecutors, Dibee and four other people drove two vehicles — a Dodge van and a Chevy Blazer — to a staging area on public land outside Redmond. After they arrived, they dug a shallow hole in the ground.

Wearing gloves, ski masks, dark shoes and clothing, they did a radio check.

Once outside the facility, court documents state, Dibee allegedly bored a hole in the concrete wall of the abattoir, near the refrigeration units, masking the sound by drilling when the coolers kicked on. The plan, prosecutors said, was to pour the fuel into the wall. After the hole was drilled, Dibee allegedly stuffed it with rags. The plan went off course, according to the government, when one of Dibee's homemade incendiary devices caught fire prematurely.



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The federal government claims Joseph Dibee and a group of other environmental activists caused significant damage to the Cavel West horse slaughter facility in Madras, Oregon, in 1997.  
*via Federal Bureau of Investigations*

As the flames at the buildings of Cavel West lit up the Central Oregon sky, the group returned to the staging area. They threw their clothing into the hole they had dug and poured muriatic acid on top to destroy evidence before burying the garments, law enforcement said. As they made their escape, the activists used tree branches to sweep away their vehicles' tire tracks.

In claiming responsibility for destroying the “horse murdering plant,” the Animal Liberation Front faxed Cavel West’s corporate headquarters, saying the arson “would bring a screeching halt to what countless protests and letter writing campaigns could never stop.”

And in a practical way, the ALF was right. The charred husks of buildings that remained at the Cavel West site were a total loss, exceeding \$1.2 million in damages. The company faced permitting complications in Redmond after the fire and never rebuilt.

Dibee would not discuss the specifics of his case. He has pleaded not guilty to conspiracy and arson charges. In speaking with OPB, however, he remembered the Associated Press article and called Cavel West a “criminal enterprise.”

Bureau of Land Management employees “were probably making a lot more money adopting horses and selling to the slaughterhouse than they were getting paid by the BLM,” he said.

Dibee faces charges for other attacks related to environmental activism. Those charges include destruction of an energy facility after activists toppled a transmission tower owned by the Bonneville Power Administration. He’s also accused in a 1998 fire at a USDA facility in Olympia, Washington; and a 2001 fire that burned hay and a pole barn at a Bureau of Land Management facility near Litchfield, California.

Jennifer Kolar, another defendant, was in a relationship with Dibee in the 1990s, which court documents describe as a “disaster by all accounts.” Her attorney would



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Earth Liberation Front.

“If two different snitches tell them Joe did something, that’s good enough for (the government),” said Matt Schindler, Dibee’s attorney. “It’s not a case with forensic evidence, with physical evidence ... with a single iota of direct evidence.”

Dibee’s charges carry up to 20 years in prison and, if found guilty, he could also be jointly responsible for millions of dollars in restitution.

## A visit from the FBI

Dibee calls himself someone who has lived multiple lives over the years, needing to shed his country, language, job — even his family — at a moment’s notice.

In the years after Cavel West burned, local police and federal agents chased leads but the crimes went unsolved. The case broke in the mid-2000s, when law enforcement was able to turn one member of the The Family into a key informant, who went so far as to wear a wire.

Dibee said he worked at a software security job for Microsoft in Seattle during this time. But that life began to dissolve Dec. 7, 2005.

Two FBI agents visited Dibee that day at his home in Kenmore, Washington.

The agents’ visit came as the agency was massively reorganizing to prioritize terrorism post-9/11. [An analysis](#) by the Department of Justice’s Office of Inspector General showed that between 2000 and 2003, roughly 20% of the agents working cases of violent crime, drug cartels and white-collar crime were reassigned to terrorism investigations.

The federal officers who visited Dibee served him with a subpoena for a grand jury, and two days later, he and his attorney met with the agents.

“Dibee and his lawyer listened as the government outlined the evidence the government had gathered of Dibee’s involvement in the Cavel West arson,” federal prosecutors wrote in court documents. “The government hoped that Dibee would



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But Dibee did not.

“They basically laid out this case about a bunch of things that appeared to be very — you know, like they’re reaching, they’re just fabricating,” he said. “I figured, ‘I can beat that.’”

According to Dibee, the federal officers also issued a warning: Indictments are coming.

“You should be a snitch now, while you have something to offer us,” he recalled the agents saying.

During that same meeting, Dibee claims, the FBI told him they knew he had firearms and implied they wouldn’t allow him to surrender. Later, an FBI wanted-persons poster offering a \$50,000 reward would warn the public that he should be considered “armed and dangerous.”



Photo taken in early 1990s

**Aliases:**

Joe Dibee, "Seattle", "Steve", "God"

**DESCRIPTION**

<b>Date(s) of Birth Used:</b>	November 10, 1967	<b>Hair:</b>	Black
<b>Place of Birth:</b>	Seattle, Washington	<b>Eyes:</b>	Brown
<b>Height:</b>	6'3"	<b>Sex:</b>	Male
<b>Weight:</b>	150 pounds	<b>Race:</b>	White
<b>NCIC:</b>	W108732930	<b>Nationality:</b>	American
<b>Occupation:</b>	Computer Software Tester		



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## CAUTION

On January 19, 2006, a federal grand jury in Eugene, Oregon, indicted Joseph Mahmoud Dibee on multiple charges related to his alleged role in a domestic terrorism cell. Dibee was charged with two conspiracy violations related to seventeen incidents and one count of arson. These crimes occurred in Oregon, Washington, California, Colorado, and Wyoming, and date back to 1996. Many of the crimes he is accused of participating in were claimed to be committed by the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) or the Animal Liberation Front (ALF).

## REWARD

The FBI is offering a reward of up to \$50,000 for information leading to the arrest of Joseph Mahmoud Dibee.

### SHOULD BE CONSIDERED ARMED AND DANGEROUS

If you have any information concerning this person, please contact your local FBI office or the nearest American Embassy or Consulate.

The FBI put out a wanted poster with a \$50,000 reward, searching for Joseph Dibee after he was indicted for his alleged role in crimes committed by the Earth Liberation Front or the Animal Liberation Front.

*via Federal Bureau of Investigations*

“I’m a Middle Eastern person, and it’s not lost on me the implications of that in the United States,” Dibee told OPB. “So, the government started the conversation by saying, ‘We know he has firearms.’ and ‘Do you want to do what we tell you to, or are we going to come get you?’ That’s a very thinly veiled threat. I took it as that.”

Dibee believes federal law enforcement saw the cases against him and members of The Family as a way to justify a growing anti-terrorism apparatus at the time. Before 9/11, there were 912 members in the FBI’s Joint Terrorism Task Forces, groups of law-enforcement officers nationwide who focus exclusively on terrorism cases. By 2005, there were more than 5,000 members. Federal documents also show the program increased its budget by more than \$150 million in just two years.

“A lot of these people’s careers are made by ‘I caught a terrorist’ kind of thing. This is post 9/11, not long after. And the whole hysteria around that,” Dibee said. “There just aren’t that many terrorists in the United States.”

After he declined the government’s offer to cooperate, Dibee left the country. According to the FBI, he departed less than 72 hours after their December 2005 meeting. Before he took off, prosecutors said, Dibee burned “incriminating evidence in his fireplace.”

When asked by OPB whether he burned anything before he fled, Dibee’s attorney



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“Let me put it to you this way,” Schindler said, “we would like for the government to explain to us what exactly that was.”

A friend drove Dibee by car to Mexico City and then he flew to Lebanon before driving across the border into Syria.

“The secret police of Syria already knew I was coming, somehow,” Dibee told OPB. “I stayed with some of my relatives there. At one point (Syrian officials) came to me and said ‘We have this job for you.’ And they said to me, ‘Do you want to help your family and your country?’ And I said, ‘Yes, of course,’ because there’s a right answer and a wrong answer. And I want to be sure to get the right answer on that one.”

## A terrorist?

Weeks after Dibee fled the country, then Attorney General Alberto Gonzales called a press conference at the Justice Department to announce the agency’s takedown of The Family.

“Today’s indictment is a significant step in bringing these terrorists to justice,” Gonzales said as he told reporters about a 65-count indictment against the activists, including Dibee.

“The indictment tells a story of four and a half years of arson, vandalism, violence and destruction, claimed to have been executed on behalf of the Animal Liberation Front or Earth Liberation Front, extremist movements known to support acts of domestic terrorism,” Gonzales said.

When FBI Director Robert Mueller took to the podium, he said the federal charges were the first step in bringing the “cell” to justice.

“Terrorism is terrorism, no matter what the motive,” Mueller said. “This indictment marks significant progress in our efforts to combat animal rights extremism and eco-terrorism.”

The sentiment that motive doesn’t matter in terrorism cases persists in today’s FBI. The agency defines terrorism as any type of violence with “political or social



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organizations.

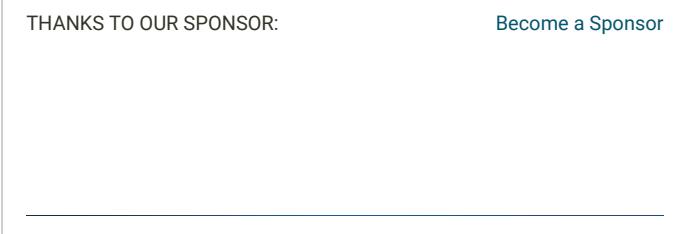
Mueller said the FBI would vigorously pursue “extremist movements whose criminal acts threaten the American economy and American lives.”

Not everyone views the cases against the environmental groups as clear cut examples of terrorism, however. Former FBI special agent Michael German, who dedicated much of his career to thwarting domestic terrorism until he left the agency in 2004, said environmental activists drew attention, in part, because they targeted wealthy interests, such as the timber industry.

“In the late ’90s, there started to be a focus on these groups, mostly because a lot of the industries that their protest movements targeted became more vocal,” said German, who now works for the Brennan Center for Justice’s Liberty and National Security program.

While German was not familiar with the details of the cases against Dibee and his co-defendants, he said the FBI at the time became “very outspoken” about so-called “eco-terrorism.”

“Even though there’s not a single homicide that I’m aware of that was caused in any movement by an animal rights group or environmental protest group,” German said.



Historically, far right and white supremacist groups are far deadlier, often responsible for killing a dozen or more people every year, sometimes through mass violence.

German added that while criminal activities linked to environmental activism warrant investigation, classifying those acts as terrorism is mostly for the political benefit of the FBI and others in federal law enforcement.

“Certainly, after 9/11, when terrorism became more of a vehicle for the FBI to obtain more authority and resources, they became very outspoken — basically uniting with industry to position advocacy against corporate practices as a threat of terrorism.”



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violent white supremacists and far right militant groups.”

Schindler, Dibee’s attorney, said it’s too easy for the government to call people terrorists, which can have severe consequences.

“When we apply this label terrorism, it’s almost as though we’re saying to the government, ‘OK, you have cart blanche to use every asset and every resource,’ ... without any real critical thought applied to that decision,” Schindler said. “And I think that that’s the problem.”

## Life in exile

After arriving in Syria in 2005, Dibee landed at the University of Kalamoon.

“I enjoy the university environment,” Dibee said. “I was there teaching, initially computer security and computer science in general, and then sort of moved into renewable energy and engineering.”

Dibee has spoken about his time overseas, both during his interview with OPB and during several federal court hearings before U.S. District Court Judge Ann Aiken, who has overseen the case.



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Joe Dibee is portrayed while looking out of a window at his family's home on Wednesday, February 17, 2021, in Seattle.

Megan Farmer / KUOW

Dibee said he designed a massive solar-energy project that would not only help generate electricity for 35% of the country, but also relieve drought-stricken Syria by desalinating sea water as a byproduct.

“We had gotten to the point where we had a prototype, but the war started before we could produce a pilot project,” Dibee testified.

Like other countries during the Arab Spring, armed conflicts escalated around 2011 in Syria and destabilized life there.

“I believe that had I not been caught up in the war, had I not been forced to flee like one out of every five people who are refugees, I think that the project would have been very successful and helped a lot of people,” he said.

Dibee lived in a housing complex with other scientists until it was targeted by anti-government forces. He said he escaped to a nearby village for “about 10 days or two weeks” in late 2011 and hid while the Syrian government tried to get him out of the country.

Forces who opposed Syrian President Bashar al Assad eventually killed one of Dibee’s coworkers, he told OPB, and it is this type of violence he sees as clear terrorism.

“They knocked on her door and she opened the door. They shot her in the face in front of her children,” Dibee recalled, pausing to hold back tears. “I had a pretty close call. ... I knew I needed to leave at that point.”

It was the second time he would uproot his entire life and flee to another country.

As part of his work on the energy facility, Dibee said, he’d previously traveled to Russia and already had an existing visa. So, he said, Russia was his first option. Like Syria, Russia also doesn’t have an extradition treaty with the United States.



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“Originally, I thought I’d be there for only a few months while this sort of insurrection business got settled,” Dibee said. “It turned out to be eight years almost.”

He took Russian language classes and twice tried to launch biodiesel business ventures, one in Moscow and the other near Sochi. In both cases, Dibee said, he was squeezed out by corrupt partners.

At the end of a 2019 hearing, Judge Aiken — who sentenced about half of Dibee’s co-defendants to longer sentences under terrorism enhancements — seemed impressed with his ongoing efforts to improve the environment through engineering.

“I think you — from everything I read in these cases — that’s a 180-degree turn from how people started in this particular case,” Aiken told him.

While in Russia, he also married and helped raise a stepson, who is now 11.

“I have strong emotional ties in Russia,” Dibee said in court. “I have a wife and a child who I love very much there.”

Dibee claims he twice tried to reach a deal for surrender while overseas, and spent \$70,000 to hire a team of high-profile attorneys, including [Nancy Hollander](#), who has represented clients such as whistleblower Chelsea Manning [in national security cases](#).

“We had a discussion with the government,” Dibee told OPB. “Everyone was on the phone.”



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Joe Dibee is portrayed while sitting on the porch of his family's home on Wednesday, February 17, 2021, in Seattle. KUOW Photo/Megan Farmer  
*Megan Farmer / KUOW*

Hollander told OPB the information Dibee shared with her as a client is privileged, but confirmed the negotiations with the government “never materialized.”

In his second attempt to reach a resolution in early 2015, Dibee said, he offered the U.S. government information about smugglers who he suspected were bringing terrorists from Syria through Russia and into Europe. That year was the beginning of a series of violent terrorist attacks across Europe, many connected to the Islamic State. Schindler, Dibee’s current attorney, provided OPB with a copy of an email that shows Dibee was in communication with Finnish police in 2015. Dibee said he wanted Finnish authorities to act as an intermediary with the United States. The Finnish officer who emailed with Dibee declined to comment for this story.

According to the federal government, in exchange for information, Dibee sought to have all his charges dismissed in the United States.

In 2019, Assistant U.S. Attorney Geoff Barrow acknowledged Dibee’s attempt to relay information to one of the previous prosecutors, Kirk Engdall.

“Mr. Engdall forwarded the information to the FBI for evaluation,” Barrow wrote in court documents. “However, Mr. Engdall was not willing to dismiss the charges against Dibee — which was always Dibee’s demand. In the end, the information was not actionable.”

Oregon’s U.S. Attorney’s Office would not comment on why they couldn’t use or act on the information, nor would the office provide details on the information Dibee relayed. Engdall and other retired prosecutors who worked the case also declined an interview because the case is still open.



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“The bottom line is that Mr. Dibee never surrendered,” Barrow said during a July hearing. “He was a fugitive for 12 years, and he was captured, and he was brought to justice.”

## A prison in Cuba

Dibee’s life was upended once more in 2018 — but this time, he had no say in the decision.

It was May, and he had traveled to South America on a two-month trip that was part business, part pleasure.

“While I was living in Russia, I ended up working — going on a kayaking trip with the intent of finding work in Ecuador,” Dibee said during a 2019 court hearing. One of the reasons he needed to make more money, he said, was so he and his wife could have a baby.

Prosecutors included copies of the Syrian passport Dibee used to travel and his itinerary in court documents. What happened on his return trip has never been fully explained.

Speaking to OPB, Dibee revealed his first public accounting of how he was captured by the U.S. government. OPB was able to verify parts of his story through testimony given at court hearings since 2018, and through documents entered into the court record. Other parts of the story were not independently verifiable. The U.S. Department of Justice has declined to respond to Dibee’s version of events.

While flying back to Russia from Ecuador, the El Salvadoran National Police stopped Dibee during a connecting flight. He was taken to an interrogation room one floor down from the concourse, where Dibee said he was questioned by a group of Americans. He said he knows they were Americans because Salvadorans “know how to speak Spanish,” and the people questioning him spoke in English with American accents.

The interrogators wanted to know the answer to one question: Who are you? Dibee had traveled on his Syrian passport, and his name was spelled “Yousef Deba” — a



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With time ticking away until his next flight and no proof that Yousef Deba was Joseph Dibee, the people who detained him took biometric data, which Dibee said included his fingerprints and iris scans, before releasing him to catch his next flight to Havana.

Dibee said he saw other Arabs waiting to be questioned, and he believes his ethnicity may have played a role in his initial interrogation.

“At the end of it, the woman said to the guy, ‘I have five more of these. We need to hurry him along,’” Dibee recalled.

**Related:** [Oregon judge ends pre-trial custody of Joseph Dibee, who faces decades old eco-terrorism charges](#)

After he landed in Cuba, Dibee had a 26-hour layover before his flight home to Moscow. By that time, the biometric data collected in El Salvador had linked Dibee to warrants for his arrest in the United States.

While in the terminal, Dibee said, he was approached by several Cubans dressed in drab uniforms, who led him to a car. The men did not tell Dibee where he was being taken, but kilometers ticked by as the vehicle headed west from the Havana airport.

What happened next, according to Dibee, was a torturous interrogation that lasted days. Dibee has frequently referred to it as his “kidnapping.” Around eight days passed between his detention in Cuba, and his final extradition to Oregon to face charges.

“I was held in this sort of immigration place,” Dibee told OPB. “They put me first out in a cage in the courtyard, and this angry little man came there and demanded to know who I was.”

The “angry man” was the same person who picked Dibee up at the airport. He waived around several faxed pages while shouting in Spanish. On them was a black and white picture of Dibee. The document was written in English, Dibee said, and had his name.

“The guy was trying to get me to say, ‘Yeah, that’s me,’” Dibee said.

He recognized the picture because it had appeared on his FBI wanted poster.



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most wanted type picture.”

As the days passed without confirmation of Dibee’s identity, he said his captors became increasingly agitated. At one point, he said, he was stripped naked and photographed. Later, a man with “all sorts of tools” showed up as part of Dibee’s interrogation. One of the Cubans gestured toward the tools.

“Even though we didn’t speak the same language, there are certain things that come through fairly clearly,” Dibee said. “I kinda got, ‘Hey, you know, if you don’t confess, that guy is going to do you with those tools.’ That was a clear message.”

Dibee describes days spent in a cell with a south-facing window, and no place to seek refuge from the blistering Caribbean sun.

“I had no water,” he said, “and basically, I just cooked.”

By the second day in the cell, Dibee was losing consciousness and had a splitting headache. On the third day, he said, his jailers took him for another round of questioning. Eventually, he was given water.

The officials, according to Dibee, said they were with Cuban military intelligence.

“We think you’re a terrorist,” Dibee recalled the interrogators saying.

Dibee said he made up some “bullshit” about robbing banks with Jesse James and burning down Microsoft because “they wouldn’t give me the day off from work.”

“They wrote all that stuff down, they were really excited about it,” Dibee said. “After a few hours and probably four liters of water, they put me back in a cell.”

That cell was cooler and had some shade.

Later, the Cubans returned angry, aware of his lies, Dibee said. The same man who had interrogated him for days, reminded Dibee that no one knew where he was, and warned him they could throw him in the ocean.

“I got tortured, there’s no other way to say it,” Dibee said. “I was definitely threatened.”

Officials with the Cuban Embassy in Washington, D.C., did not return OPB’s



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Dibee said his captors eventually relented and let him call his wife. She had expected him back at their home in Krasnodar, Russia, days earlier. He would not provide OPB with her full name or contact information for fear of his family's safety.

As the interrogation wore on, Dibee said, it became increasingly clear, based on the questions the Cubans asked, that they were starting to figure out who he was.

"I knew that they were talking to the Americans at that point; it was pretty much over," he said.

On Aug. 9, 2018, Dibee was flown to Portland and taken into federal detention, where he remained for more than two years. While in the U.S. Marshals' custody at the Multnomah County Jail, another inmate sucker punched Dibee and broke his jaw. Later, he was among the first people in the jail to contract COVID-19 during a major outbreak.

## Release

Battered, but alive, Dibee walked out of the Multnomah County Justice Center on Jan. 12, with a beard billowing out from behind a mask.

For the first time, Dibee said, he's meaningfully able to look over the discovery in the case as he prepares his defense. He said being out of jail has been a relief, as he can now help care for his father, who is ailing from advanced dementia.

Largely confined to his father's home in Seattle, Dibee spends his days transitioning between his father's health needs and reading over years-old documents, looking for possible holes in the government's case against him. His goal is to convince prosecutors, and possibly a jury, that the case is not as solid as it once appeared. He acknowledges the feat before him. Of the 18 charged, 15 have been convicted.



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Joseph Dibee was released from federal custody in Portland in January 2021. Dibee is accused of assisting in eco-sabotage attacks in the late 1990s and early 2000s.

Courtesy Matthew Schindler

“In most cases where the government charges terrorism, it’s actually not,” Dibee told OPB. “The thing is for me, being an Arab man in the United States, I’m more susceptible, more vulnerable to that accusation. And I recognize that.”

Since the attack on Cavel West in the 90s, the focus of terrorism investigations has shifted in America. Where federal agents and prosecutors once held press conferences about fringe environmentalists burning unoccupied buildings or spiking trees, they now talk about Three Percenters, Oath Keepers, Antifa, Boogaloo Boys, Proud Boys, The Base, Anarchists, Patriot Front, Atomwaffen Division — a seething mass of political discontents.



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Oregon U.S. Attorney Billy Williams, who retired in February, said without changes to the law, the government has limited ability to quash extremism.



U.S. Attorney for Oregon Billy Williams in his office on Feb. 21, 2020.

*Conrad Wilson / OPB*

“We don’t have enough tools as prosecutors,” Williams said. “You’re very limited. There is no criminal domestic terrorism statute. There are sentencing enhancements related to domestic terrorism, but there is no actual criminal statute.”

In essence, it’s unlikely for a jury to hear a person on trial called a domestic terrorist. So, he said, the violence continues.

Williams points to his own office’s failure to convict Ammon and Ryan Bundy, leaders of the 2016 armed takeover of the Malheur National Wildlife Refuge, as a



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Ammon Bundy [leads the People's Rights Network, a national conglomeration of far right militias and conspiracy theorists](#) who oppose the government.

But Williams doesn't stop there. He also believes several people arrested for crimes at 2020 racial justice protests in Portland should face terrorism charges.

"To just go around and engage in complete destruction and violence, assaulting police officers — that has to be dealt with," he said.

After the Jan. 6 attack in Washington, D.C., however, some say broadly grouping people who commit property destruction in with those who intentionally take lives is an outdated way to view terrorism. And law enforcement is under pressure to clearly articulate how it defines domestic terrorism going forward.

Last month during [his confirmation hearing for U.S. attorney general](#), Merrick Garland — a man who prosecuted one of America's most [infamous domestic terrorists](#), Timothy McVeigh — was asked whether attacks on government property, like the federal courthouse in Portland, constituted domestic terrorism.



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R-La., as he appears before the Senate Judiciary Committee for his confirmation hearing, on Capitol Hill in Washington, Monday, Feb. 22, 2021.  
J. Scott Applewhite / AP

Garland replied his definition was the use of violence to “disrupt democratic processes.”

“So an attack on a courthouse while in operation, trying to prevent judges from actually deciding cases — that plainly is domestic extremism, domestic terrorism,” he said. “An attack simply on government property at night, or any other circumstance, is a clear crime and a serious one and should be punished.”

Garland, who the Senate confirmed Wednesday as the top law enforcement officer in the country, said an act simply isn’t terrorism if people or democratic functions aren’t affected.

“That’s where I draw the line,” he said. “Both are criminal, but one is a core attack on our democratic institutions.”

Still, Dibee remains ambivalent about law enforcement’s ability to distinguish what is, or is not, terrorism.

“Americans have a very skewed version of what terrorism is and it’s really quite disappointing,” he told OPB. “It’s actually, I would call it repugnant. I think that people who have actually experienced terrorism would be grossly disgusted by the way the government characterizes it in the United States.”

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